DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 244 IR 008 988

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TITLE Video Pals: An Experiment in Pupil-Generated Video Communication.
PUB DATE [78]
NOTE 11p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Creativity: *Elementary Education: Open Education: *Production Techniques: *Videotape Recordings: *Visual Literacy

ABSTRACT

A visual literacy project to explore how children who have had no experience or instruction in the use of television would use the technology as a communication medium is discussed. One second and one fourth grade class were chosen to prepare three videotape "letters" communicating to their counterparts in another school information about their class and their school. The children were allowed complete freedom in planning and producing the video messages. It was hypothesized that (1) the structure of the children's video messages would be imitative of the format of prepackaged television products, (2) the children would rely more on the verbal mode than the visual to communicate their messages, and (3) the degree to which the children used the medium creatively rather than imitatively would differ with the degree of openness of their educational environment. A content analysis of the tapes indicated that they were imitative of broadcast television, and that the fourth graders in particular relied more on the verbal mode than the visual to communicate their messages. No conclusions were drawn with regard to correlating the degree of openness of the classroom with creative use of the medium. (LLS)

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VIDEO PALS:

An Experiment in Pupil-generated Video Communication

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IR008988

The phenomenon of television has been with us for over three decades and yet rare is the classroom where the medium is an integral part of instructional strategies, and rare is the child who is media literate. For much of these thirty years the posture of educational institutions has been to criticize the role that television plays in replacing other, more valued, activities, or the effect that its programming content may have on children's behavior. This type of criticism is directed at a context where the relationship of the viewer to the medium is seen as hierarchical---from producer-authority to receiver-consumer. In this context, television is seen as a socializing agent transmitting values, attitudes and beliefs that, in many cases, are in conflict with traditional socializing institutions, and one which is outside the traditional hierarchy of controls.

When children spend as much time consuming the messages of the television industry as they do those of the classroom, the threat television poses to alternative socializing forces is understandable. The rush to criticize the medium from this perspective of a producer-receiver relationship, however, has limited the development of instructional strategies which would alter the hierarchical relationship and allow students to both critically interact and creatively communicate with the medium.

The project reported here is an exploration of student use of video in a "creator" rather than "receiver" relationship to the medium. It is developed from the theoretical perspective that television is an information system in which the relationship of the consumer to the system may be defined according to the structure of the communication.[1] In the case of broadcast television, for example, the relationship of the consumer to the medium is one way-from the producer-authority to the receiver-consumer. The process (information) in this

kind of relationship functions primarily to pass on established cultural values. Where the structure of the relationship between the consumer and the medium is interactive, however, the process functions to aid the development of critical judgement. In this situation viewers learn to critically analyze culture. Recent efforts to develop instructional strategies for teaching critical viewing skills and visual literacy are representative of this kind of consumer relationship to the medium. Finally, where the structure of the relationship is not merely receiver of, or interactor with prepackaged content, but rather one of creator with the medium, the process functions to promote participation in the creation of culture. In an analogy to the medium of print, the first relationship might be represented by the provision of libraries, the second to instructional strategies that teach reading and criticism, and the third to those that teach creative writing.

As suggested above, attempts are currently being made to expand the use of television in education from the "receiver" to the "interactor" relationship. There is, however, only occasional reference in the literature to student production with video, and none where it is used as a medium of communication.[2] It was the purpose of this project to explore student use of the medium where the relationship was one of creator. Three exploratory hypotheses were advanced: first, it was expected that the structure of the video messages created by children who had grown up as recipients of prepackaged television products would be imitative of these formats rather than creative; second, it was expected that children would rely more heavily on the verbal mode that they had been taught in school than on visual means of communicating their messages; third, it was expected that the degree to which the video medium was used creatively rather than imitatively would differ with the degree of openess of the educational environment.

Procedures

One second and one fourth grade class were chosen in each of two elementary schools in a medium-sized mid-southern city. Classrooms were chosen on the basis of recommendations by the respective principals as those taught by teachers who were open to student-directed projects of the type planned.

Portable videotaping equipment was provided to each of the classes. The children in each class were requested to prepare a videotape "letter" communicating to other children in another school information about their class and their school. They were told that they would receive a similar videotape message from another school and that these would be exchanged three times in a manner similar to letter writing. Teachers agreed to allow complete freedom to the children in planning and producing the video messages.

As each video "letter" was completed by a classroom it was picked up and exchanged for a tape produced by the corresponding grade in the other school. The received tape was viewed by the class and a response tape was prepared and exchanged in the same manner. The second videotapes were delivered and a third response was prepared and exchanged.

At the close of the "video pals" period, all twelve tapes were collected by experimenters and submitted to content analysis. Each tape was divided into discrete segments. A segment was defined as a change of theme or participants which occurred while the camera was turned off. A category system was devised to content analyze both the verbal and visual aspects of the produced tapes. Each segment of each tape was scored for: (1) size and sex of group on camera; (2) authority figures pictured on camera and/or talked about; (3) kinds and structure of activities depicted; (4) amount of structure in activities depicted; (5) setting of activities; (6) relationship of themes to previous tapes.

Each tape was scored independently by two coders and inter-rater reliability estimates were obtained by computing percent of agreement. Percent of agreement

ranged between 93.4 and 98.7, indicating that coders were able to assign segments with a high degree of reliability.

After completion of the project teachers involved in the research filled out the Dimensions of Schooling Questionnaire (DISC), an instrument used to discriminate among classrooms on the basis of degree of openess (Traub, et. al., 1972; Traub and Weiss, 1978). Categories include such facets of school environment as physical makeup, decision making structure, role of the teacher, degree of student control, time scheduling, activities, and materials used. As the study was limited to classroom level analysis, only items representing "normative openess" were used.[3]

Results

The main question considered in this exploratory study was how children who had no experience nor instruction in the use of television would use the technology as a communication medium. Were they more imaginative or creative; did they rely more on verbal or visual modes? The third hypotheses deals with how educational environment is reflected in reference to authority on the tapes. These questions can be partly approached through a careful analysis of the tapes they produced.

The twelve tapes produced in the four classrooms, were most usually made up of short segments averaging less than two minutes in length. Segments in the tapes produced by second graders were shorter, averaging just 57 seconds each, while those produced in the fourth grade averaged 108 seconds in length. Second graders, however, produced twice as many segments per tape. A total of 159 segments were analyzed, 106 at the second grade level and 53 at the fourth grade level.

The average time used in producing the "letters" was just under sixteen minutes although the actual tape length would have allowed as much as 30 minutes. The longest tape produced was 27½ minutes. There was a slight tendency for the taped "letters" to get shorter across the series of three produced.

The predominent forms of communication on the tapes were categorized as "roomscans," "entertaining," "interviewing," and "showing school activities" (Table 1). "Roomscans" included all segments in which the camera operator panned the camera around the room, stopping at various locations, sometimes zooming in on particular activities. "Roomscans" were especially popular at the second grade level, making up 61.5 percent of the content of these tapes. These were rarely associated with coordinated verbal content.

At the second grade level, "showing school activities" such as spelling bees, working on workbooks and other usual classroom activities made up 22.5 percent overall, but was more prevalent in one school (37 percent) than the other. Using the camera in apparent attempts to entertain was not a popular mode.

On-camera activities in the fourth grade tapes varied greatly from second grade subjects. "Roomscans" declined in popularity to 12.6 percent, putting them in third place behind "interviewing" and "entertaining" as the most prevalent modes of communicating. The most popular form used was "interviewing." This usually consisted of one class member asking questions and requesting replies from other class members in formats similar to person-on-the-street interviews or interviews with athletes often seen on commercial television.

Outright attempts at entertaining--singing, imitating rock groups, doing gymnastics--also gained in popularity (24.6 percent), although it was far more popular in one of the classrooms than in the other. "Showing school activities" dwindled to fourth place compared with second grade.

If one ignores for the moment purpose or impact, the four modes can be assayed on a prima facie basis as to their relative contributions of the verbal and visual portions. For example, "interviewing" is the one of the four which is predominatly verbal in mode. "Roomscans," on the other hand, represents a predominatly visual means of communication. "Entertaining" and "showing off activities" are less so but still predominatly visual activities. This is

especially true when, as was the case in these tapes, the display was often without running verbal monologue. Assayed in this manner, two generalizations can be made: (1) the pupil producers were able to emphasize the use of the visual medium in their productions; and looked at developmentally the use of more verbal forms (i.e., interviewing) increased from second to fourth grade.

Results of DISC measures indicated that it was possible to distinguish relative degrees of normative openess among the four classrooms (Table 2). Scores ranged from a low of 95 to a high of 131. The two highest scores, representing the greatest degree of openess, were from the same school. When the data were broken down comparing the two most open and the two least open classrooms, only one consistent difference emerged: authority figures such as teachers and principals were talked about more in the less open classrooms.

Because of frequent use of the panning technique, frequency of authority figures on camera was not a reliable, meaningful, characteristic of choice on camera. The same applied to the size and sex of grcups on camera.

In the twelve tapes, only 3 or the 159 segments contained any direct attempt at tape-to-tape communication by responding to tapes viewed of the counterpart classroom.

In only four instances did students choose to venture outside of their own classrooms to depict other aspects of their schools. Two of these cases were interviews with respective principals.

Because of the small sample size, none of the foregoing data have been submitted to statistical analysis. They represent only nonrandom trends which may point the way to a more rigorous investigation involving a greater number of classrooms.

Discussion

Albers has suggested that the illiterate person in the year 2000 will be the one who cannot communicate in the visual mode. As is often stated, the average child spends more time watching television than in the classroom.

Virtually all of this time spent in viewing television is in a receiver relationship with the medium. Even when the medium is used in an educational capacity, very little interaction is expected and almost never is the student expected tc creatively produce or communicate. If Albers is correct, the challenge to education to develop instructional strategies which address both critical consumption and creative expression with the visual medium of television is clear.

The experiment described herein was aimed at exploring questions about children's possible use of television in creative visual literacy. The results indicated that children as young as seven years old were comfortable experimenting with capturing visual images on tape and playing them back. They did not appear, however, to cognitively understand the concept of themselves communicating in a visual mode. They chose instead to imitate modes that they had seen on broadcast television, and, with age, to rely more heavily on verbal explanations.

As participants in the creation of culture, the students were not apparently completely aware of, nor perhaps comfortable with examining their power to use a broader range available to them in the visual mode; they were not willing to go much beyond what they had seen on commercial television.

The importance of the study may lie not in the quantifiable results but in the heuristic value of the technique. If it is reasonable to speculate that communication in the visual mode is going to be a sine qua non for complete literacy in the coming electronic, post-industrial era, then society and its schools may need to begin to self-consciously facilitate growth in a visually literate people. The "video-pals" technique provides both a way of teaching creative use of the medium, and a way of assessing outcomes and change through the analysis of the videotape artifacts.

TABLE 1

Categories of Activities

School 1	2nd Grade	4th Grade
entertaining	9.3%	43.8%
interviewing	0.0	43.8
showing activities	37.0	0.5
room scans	42.0	11.8
visual nonschool	0.0	0.0
garble	11.6	0.0
School 2		
entertaining	0.0	5.4
interviewing	0.0	59.5
showing activities	8.0	16.2
room scans	81.0	13.5
visual nonschool	1.6	0.0
garble	9.6	5.0

TABLE 2

DISC Scores of Normative Openess by Classroom

	2nd Grade	4th Grade	$\bar{X}$
School 1	107	95	101
School 2	131	122.5	126.75

NOTES

[1]Influenced by cybernetics, this theoretical position defines information not as a packaged "thing" or product, but rather as a process. Communication technologies such as the printing press or Xerox machine, computers, or television, for example, are process oriented. They transmit information, they do not create it. Their use, however, may be product oriented. As a result, the relationship of the consumer to the system (i.e., use of the communication technology) may be defined according to a product-process continuum. See for example, Berger, R., "Video and the Restructuring of Myth," in D. Davis and A. Simmons, eds., The New Television, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977 or Shamberg, M., Guerrilla Television, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971.

[2]Projects describing the use of television production in the classroom are reported in B. Brune and J. Splaine, "Student Production--Getting Started," Audiovisual Instruction, October 1976, DiPillo, P., "Video Tape in the Classroom, Audiovisual Instruction, April 1978, Knudson, R., "Involvement via Videotape," Audiovisual Instruction, December 1969, Mills, L., "A John Chancellor in your Classroom?" Teacher, January 1976, and Smith, W., "VTR: A Tool not a Tent Show," Media and Methods, May/June 1977.

[3]Normative openness refers to aspects of school activity representing student choice in learning tasks, while "procedural openness" refers to aspects of school programs that could be manipulated without affecting the amount of choice students would be able to exercise.

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